

# Young people looking forward: Imagined future and normative tensions in urban Norway

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## Abstract

We explore the meaning-making practices of ‘little personal stories’ and ‘big societal stories’ in the imagined futures of 12- and 13-year-olds within Norway, known for its egalitarian ideals and welfare society. Using the concept ‘prospective narratives’, we explore these practices through the students’ narrative world-making. The narratives connect the imagined future with gender and class variations related to larger social norms in the arenas of work and family. They demonstrate embodied and positioned cultural knowledge of the present, reflecting tensions between dominant social norms—‘big stories’—in terms of child-centred parenting, active work-life and egalitarian ideals across gender and class.

## KEYWORDS

childhood, egalitarianism, imagined future, inequality, intersectionality

## INTRODUCTION

This article explores the imagined futures of 12- and 13-year-olds living within a Norwegian context. Researchers apply a methodological focus on imagined futures to explore norms, discourses, possibilities and limitations from the subjective standpoint of today’s children and young people. Norway is internationally known for its generous welfare state, with high degrees of solidarity and social trust (Saltkjel & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2014; Stjernø, 2009). Within this ‘social democratic’ welfare setting (Esping-Andersen, 1990), social and gender equality are explicit ideals. We specifically address three dominant narratives prevalent in Norwegian society. Aside from encompassing a rights-and-duty thinking often inscribed in laws, regulations and measures directed at individuals,



families and institutions, the narratives are connected to powerful social norms and attitudes. First, *the Norwegian work-approach* encompasses the right to economic equality, earned through the duty to partake in active, and preferably full-time, employment when possible, with the individual aim of self-sufficiency from welfare benefits and the societal aim of welfare state sustainability (Stjernø & Øverbye, 2012). Second, *gender equality* is connected to the state aim to provide equal opportunity for choosing one's life path, regardless of gender. This is to be facilitated through the establishment of gender quotas in male- or female-dominant educations and professions (Bendiksen et al., 2018), and a generous, shared parental leave to enable equal participation by both parents in work-life and child-care (Hennum, 2015). Third, *child-centredness and child-centred parenting* has heavily influenced Norway since the ratification and implementation of The UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991/2003. According to the UNCRC, and Norwegian law, the period of childhood includes children up to the age of 18. Norway has been called an exceptional case (Hennum, 2006, 2015), because of its long tradition for prioritising children's rights and welfare (Gilbert et al., 2011).

In the following, we will refer to these predominant social narratives as 'big stories' and investigate their interrelatedness to the 'little personal stories' of the children—12- and 13-year-old Norwegian public-school students—participating in our study. The meanings children make concerning the future are shaped in large part by experience, where they are and where they have been positioned in social life and in relation with others. The societal and the personal may be interpreted in relation to the other (Gubrium, 2013; Mead, 1934/1967). We examine this interconnected relationship in the future-oriented narratives of the children's imagined lives as adults. We refer in the analysis to the big and little stories being represented (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The participants actively make meaning of the societal big stories in the narratives they produce—the little stories providing personal accounts of their potential adult lives.

The exercise of examining big and little stories reveals substantial normative tensions. Norway is an interesting case for such an exploration, as a country where the norms are not always complementary or compatible, but rather counter-intuitive, as our analysis will show. The knowledge of and experience that children have with the big stories in a given society are likely to influence how they envision their present and their future and the choices available to them, ascribing available tracks for action (Davies & Harré, 1990) or available 'opportunity structures' (Hundeide, 2005).

Recent national surveys with youth respondents in Norway age 13–19, 'Ungdata' (Young Data), show that Norwegian youth for the most part report being happy with their present lives and view their futures as bright, in the sense of having meaningful personal relations, good homes and employment (Bakken, 2019). Yet, the same survey research suggests a breach in this trend since 2015. The share of respondents who believe they will never be unemployed has decreased with almost 10%, and the share who believe they will live a happy life decreased with 6% in 2018. The tendency towards less future optimism is generally higher among respondents on the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. In recent years, there has also been a marked increase in young people, especially girls, reporting physical- and mental health issues and high levels of stress. In contrast to youths on the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder, youths on the higher end generally report fewer feelings of stress. However, Ungdata notes that it is necessary to supplement such survey studies with explorative, in-depth approaches. A new Norwegian Official Report (NOU, 2019, p. 19), based on both survey and qualitative studies, has found that gendered norms and expectations limit the opportunities of boys and girls, starting at an early age. There are 'strict demands', stress and pressure on girls as to how to behave and look, and 'tight frames' for boys, with traditional norms of masculinity. In this report, however, the intersections between gender and class are not a primary focus of investigation. We explore these issues of normativity, tensions, opportunities and limitations further, by applying an analytical lens of intersectionality: the dynamic relations between identity categories such as age, gender, class,



ethnicity and sexuality (Orupabo, 2014; Winker & Degele, 2011). Given the Norwegian big stories of full-time employment, economic/gender equality and child-centredness, our focus is primarily on the intersection of two of these categories—gendered norms and the classed norms present in the children's environments. Our main research question is how the informants make meaning of and engage with normative big stories and their own imagined opportunities in a gendered and classed world. We take our departure from narratives written by the students about a day in their imagined lives as 30 years old. Applying this future-oriented focus, using narratives of 'later', enables us to learn more about narratives of 'now' in the public imagination (Gubrium, 2013), as seen from the position of the children in our study.

## FUTURE-ORIENTED YOUTH NARRATIVES

As neatly summarised by sociologists Carabelli and Lyon (2016, p. 1110–1111) future-oriented studies can offer valuable knowledge about 'how young people's imagination of the future reflects contemporary social, political, economic and cultural dynamics, the positions of young people in society more generally, and their capacity to take action in their own lives'. While not fully articulated (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016; Mische, 2009; Uprichard, 2011), future mobility and transitional research has in recent years become part of an expanding body of literature on young people and the future (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016; Elliott, 2010; Haldar, 2013; Halldén, 1998; Heggli et al., 2013; Irwin, 2009; Jansen & Andenæs, 2011; Lloyd et al., 2018; Lyon & Crow, 2012; Pahl, 1978; Steedman, 1987).

We work across the fields of future-research within childhood- and youth studies by using the concept 'prospective narratives': 'personal constructions of the future, made possible within certain discursive contexts' (Jansen & Andenæs, 2011, p. 122). Prospective narratives, as situated and functioning in the present (Jansen & Andenæs, 2011, p. 126), may be seen as part of children and young people's 'tool-kits' in their continuously ongoing processes of 'being' and 'becoming' (Nielsen, 2015, p. 3). The 'tool-kit' metaphor refers to the appropriation of cultural tools (Wertsch, 1998), including the available cultural resources and repertoires, 'which (they) may use in varying configurations' (Swidler, 1986, p. 273) depending on situation and context and the task at hand. People actively draw from available 'tool-kits' (Lamont & Small, 2008; Swidler, 1986; Wertsch, 1998,) and use them in their narratives when making meaning of their lives (Bruner, 1990; Gulbrandsen, 2014; Hundeide, 2005). Children also have agency as active meaning makers (Brady & Gilligan, 2020; Kirby, 2020). In this meaning-making process, the relation between agency and structure is dialectic, not binary; children have capabilities of changing, producing and reproducing their social worlds (Oswell, 2020). Children are also social actors positioned as girls and boys, and as members of classed environments. Agency is thus not an internal, individual capacity, but is socially situated. Societal contexts shape, enable and restrict agency (Kirby, 2020; Valentine, 2011). Children are simultaneously products of culture, and co-constructors of culture (Ulvik & Gulbrandsen, 2019), and their personal little stories are neither determined nor totally 'free'. It is this mutually constitutive practice of narrative meaning- and world-making that we explore. Rather than indicating 'a story that simply carries a set of facts', we see narratives as '*social products* produced by people within the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations' and as 'interpretive devices, through which people represent themselves' (Lawler, 2002, p. 242) and their social worlds from a particular position (Uprichard, 2011). Changes in the public imagination of a culture, in the big stories, may result in new possibilities and ambitions for identities (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012), and thus new narratives.



## METHODOLOGY

We invited 12- and 13-year-olds from three schools in Oslo, Norway, situated in three socio-geographically, socio-economically and socio-culturally different communities, to write essays about their imagined everyday lives as 30 years old. The three selected schools reflected a recruitment strategy that aimed to ensure a varied material. We did not collect information about individual class background. However, we were interested to see if strong themes emerging from our empirical material would connect to classed locations and environments. The first school, 'Almstad', is located in an area predominantly populated by Oslo's 'cultural elite'. The area is known for high incomes and many of its inhabitants work within creative, cultural and knowledge-based professions such as academia, journalism and the arts (Ljunggren, 2017). The second school, 'Eikheim', is located within an area predominantly populated by the 'economic elite'. The area is known for some of the highest incomes and fortunes in Oslo, and many of its inhabitants work within the finance and private sectors (Ljunggren, 2017), or, as was also the case for 'Almstad', in traditional prestigious professions such as medicine, law, engineering and architecture. The third school, 'Furubakken', is located in an area predominantly populated by a mix of 'working-and middle-class' people. The area is known for ethnic diversity and a wide range of incomes, fortunes and professions (Ljunggren, 2017).

The material was collected by the first author at the schools in late spring 2017, at the end of our 12- and 13-year-old students' last year of elementary school, where they were still institutionally defined as children. However, the future was already a topic, as they were entering the institutional transition from elementary (1–7th grade) to middle (8–10th grade) school, embarking on something new and future oriented, while still having 'one foot in childhood'. In total, 23 girls and 20 boys participated in the writing task. From Almstad: 11 girls and 9 boys. From Eikheim: nine girls and five boys. From Furubakken: three girls and six boys. In the first round of recruitment, there was an overweight of student responses from schools in more privileged areas. Schools from multicultural/working-class areas were more reluctant to participate, in part due to research fatigue, reflecting a tendency in research to examine the underprivileged, leaving the privileged unquestioned. Unintentionally, therefore, our material reflects a majority-ethnic bias. This bias might arguably be especially well suited to explore majority ideals, yet all the students nonetheless have the dominant big stories accessible to them. Although the three schools were located in different communities, they were to varying degrees heterogeneous, and included children with different class- and ethnic backgrounds, reflective of Oslo as a multi-classed and multi-ethnic city. As the students were also anonymous, only noting their gender and school location, we do not know who wrote each individual narrative, and our focus is therefore instead on the patterns arising from the narratives collectively.

We prompted students to write individual in-class essays about their lives at 30; who they lived with, their job, extracurricular activities, possessions and interests, yet emphasised that they could write in any way they wanted. Accordingly, the 43 essays varied in form, content and detail, spanning from five packed handwritten pages to a quarter of a page, written in either present or future tense, indicating varying forms of agency in and towards the future. Still, the essays necessarily reflect elements with which the students are acquainted. For instance, gendered genre preferences may account for some of the variations. Girls tended to write longer texts, and more often within a family-narrative genre, while more boys than girls wrote shorter, action or humour/absurd genre texts (Haldar, 2013; Halldén, 1998).

Essay writing, a recognised method in qualitative social science (Connely & Clandinin, 1990), has been used to explore children and young people's imagined futures (Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016; Elliott, 2010; Heggli et al., 2013; Lyon & Crow, 2012; Pahl, 1978; Steedman, 1987). The notion of 'text in context' (van Dijk, 1997) has the ability to disclose inequality- and power structures related to





gender and class, as it takes individual stories to a collective level, showing how social structures become part of individual consciousness (Riessman, 2008). One such structure is age. We chose to task students with imagining a single day at the age of 30, as this age is associated with a secure placement in adult life that is often talked about as a threshold for achieving some of life's big, and value-laden goals.

In a first round of analysis, we focused on substance, asking *what* is told, by identifying prominent themes and content through vertical readings of each text on its own, and then in horizontal readings across the texts. In a second round of analysis, we explored narrative practices (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) by tracing *how* students linked themes to each other as well as to identities, relationships and activities. In a third round of analysis, we explored how these themes and narrative practices related to big stories of Norwegian values, norms and expectations in gendered and classed ways. In the following section, we structure our presentation according to the interrelatedness and tensions between the three big stories: child-centred parenting, active work-life and gender and class egalitarianism. We consider the strongly emerging, as well as alternate and extraordinary narratives, as equally interesting.

## LITTLE STORIES: INTERSECTIONAL TENSIONS

The students overwhelmingly ascribed positive meaning to the future, encompassing the themes of family- and work-life in happy reports, mastering their imagined future everyday lives, emphasising the ideals and norms of what a good future should or could be. In some cases, they delivered essays with written notes included such as 'I hope you like my story', indicating an awareness of the normative adult reader as their immediate audience. However, the students tied the spheres of life together in various ways, related to a spectrum of future realities, and the narratives varied according to the gender of the narrator: boys and girls focused their attention on different themes, and positioned themselves and others in their narratives in different ways. While most boys gave most space to imagined careers or personal interests, many girls focused on their roles as mothers, while career and personal interests took a secondary role in the main plot.

### **Narrating family-life within a child-centred society**

Most of the students referred to a notion of family-life. They tended to link their identities, relationships and activities to membership within a nuclear family, most often consisting of a partner and children, but also frequently consisting of an extended family: parents, siblings and additional significant others. Approximately half of the narratives contained reference to children. In those narratives, parenting practices were a major part of what constituted family-life.

### **Prioritising time**

The students who framed their stories according to parenthood-focused family-life were most often girls. Many of these girls portrayed an everyday family-life and work-life where it was a challenge to balance between the two spheres. They were 'mothers first' and referred only briefly to their work. Girls presented parenting much more often according to a strict and pressing time calendar than did boys. Girls reconciled family and work by describing jobs as 'fun but stressful', and a place to



leave 'at half past two', in order to find 'time to pick up' one's children 'from kindergarten' (Anine, Almstad). Days were filled to the brim, described through elaborated scheduling and a precise temporality. One girl woke up at '6 a.m. to get ready for work', made 'a nice breakfast' and packed a 'good lunch' for her children, then went 'to work at 7:30'. After work, she 'drove home at 4 p.m.', picking up her youngest from kindergarten on the way, before spending the afternoon helping her oldest with homework, jogging with her oldest to sports practice and then making dinner (Helena, Furubakken). Another had a 'work meeting at 8:30 a.m.', 'lunch at 12', 'left work at 4:30 p.m.', a husband who 'arrived home at 5:25 p.m.', 'pizza in the oven (..) ready by 5:45 p.m.', movie-time 'with the children' that finished by 6:29 p.m., and an 'evening snack' for the children at 8 p.m. (Pernille, Furubakken). Girls with strong family-oriented narratives still portrayed careers within intellectual and/or artistic fields, giving them a certain kind of middle-class status through the symbolic, cultural and material capital associated with such jobs. Even in the most outspoken mother narrative, Emma (Almstad) had a 'permanent job at a lab downtown, and every now and then (..) performances at the National Theater', implying high aspirations in both family- and work-life.

## Parenting practices

Both boys and girls frequently incorporated relationships to partners into their family narratives, positioning themselves as part of a couple and using partners as a device to elaborate their own social identity. Most girls referred to a partner who was also a co-parent. The co-parents of these girls, all men, were present in daily activities. Yet girls ascribed little agency or action to the co-parent in terms of maintaining the family-sphere, especially within the realm of childrearing. Several linked the co-parent's career to their absence in the daily routine—the male co-parent was 'at a conference in Berlin', but 'back tomorrow' (Emma, Almstad), had 'a shift at the hospital' (Anna, Eikheim) or was simply 'not home', making it 'a busy day' for the female narrator (Selma, Almstad). Only a few boys mentioned co-parents, always women, in their family narratives. When they did, the co-parent was present for non-standard days: days off work or in shared leisure activities, such as 'going to the zoo' (Aslak, Eikheim), or 'celebrating the national day of Norway together' (Thomas, Eikheim).

Most girls who wrote about their imagined mothering practices drew on late modern middle-class 'intensive parenting' styles (Li, 2004), where being emotionally tuned in to one's child's interests and state of mind was an essential activity (Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011). These students often took care to describe their imagined children as autonomous beings and with minds of their own, reflecting a dominant Norwegian big story of child-centredness and children's rights (Hennum, 2015; UNCRC, 1989). They referred to what their children liked: 'at least ten cuddle blankets and five pillows' (Anine, Almstad), to their moods: 'overjoyed' (Merete, Eikheim), to their peer relationships: 'my youngest daughter tried to help the oldest daughter with her homework' (Helena, Furubakken), and emotional states when lacking peers to play with: 'a little lonely' (Lise, Almstad). They also drew on norms connected to children's involvement in decision making, as noted by Mia (Almstad): 'every Friday night we watch a movie with our boys. Last time Carl and I chose the movie, so now Theodor and Kai get to choose'.

Boys' references to children were generally secondary to the main narrative, and children figured only briefly in the main description of daily activities. The boys presented a more transitory role as parent, popping quickly in and out of the 'child-sphere', with few references to emotional investment. One boy came home from work, asked his children if they 'were doing okay and had done their homework' before making dinner and watching TV (Alex, Almstad). Another described spending a day off from his career (soccer) with his family, noting that he 'wasn't so often with family', as he was



normally focused on his soccer team (Thomas, Eikheim). In these narratives, family-life was a part of the story, but not necessarily the centre of regular or deep attention.

The few boys depicting in-depth fathering practices applied a 'like father-like son' narrative. Sons followed in their father's footsteps and were companions in fun activities. One father and son duo 'played games' and 'watched a movie', with the father 'eating all his (son's) candy', after putting his son to bed far past regular bedtime (Daniel, Furubakken). Another took his son to the zoo, noting that he was 'excited' and 'didn't cry once today' (Aslak, Eikheim), while a third was a 'wrestling manager' with two sons who were 'very interested in wrestling' and who 'hope(d) to become wrestlers in the future'. The boy, as imagined father, 'supports them and teaches them a lot' (Morten, Eikheim), tying the story to a 'teacher and apprentice' narrative of parenting practices.

## Making priorities

In addition to being strongly gendered, the big story of child-centred parenting was also related to classed environments. Child-centred parenting narratives emerged mostly from the narratives of girls from the 'cultural elite' and middle-to-working-class areas of Almstad and Furubakken. The narrative was less often present in girls' narratives from the 'economic elite' area of Eikheim. While most girls portrayed their families and children as the reason that they felt 'happy and lucky' (Anine, Almstad), a few girls also described family-life as tied to discourses of sacrifice and weighed priorities: to choices made. We did not find this in any story narrated by boys. This narrative mostly took shape in the form of trading in favourite interests or dreams for the status of being a good mother and wife. One girl, a former 'national champion in cheerleading', 'miss(ed) cheering-life so much', but noted 'there is no more time for that now that I have work, children, house and husband' (Camilla, Almstad). Still, these girls took pains to note that the tradeoff was for the better, like the engineer who dreamt of 'becoming a photographer travelling the world', but now 'just' took pictures 'at home'. Yet, she 'couldn't be happier' with her 'kind husband and two delightful kids,' and felt 'immense joy' when she was with her 'little ones', 'loving them above all else', while she 'hat(ed) to leave' her children for work (Lise, Almstad). Girls from the 'economic elite' area of Eikheim also weighed priorities related to career and family. One was 'still alone' because she wanted 'to travel the world (for work) and find the one she loves later', hoping that 'one day' she would 'have a husband and child to share all of this with' (Mille, Eikheim). She also described this as a tradeoff, where she was aware of the dominant narrative, but chose to prioritise work for now. This is in line with what seemed to be the dominant narratives in Eikheim, and may reflect a classed counter-narrative to the big story of children first at the age of 30.

## Alternate narratives to family-life

In our material there were no divorces, stepfamilies, adoptions or foster-care arrangements, no same-sex couples or marriages, only one single-parent household, and only one instance where the narrator described living with her parents. While family practices in Norway are increasingly diverse, the students' stories imagined the heterosexual nuclear family as a powerful and idealised norm in their future lives (Hennum, 2015; Ulvik, 2007).

However, a distinct, alternate narrative of partnerships without children was also present in just over one-fourth of the narratives, evenly distributed among boys and girls. In addition, slightly under one-fourth of the narratives, mostly written by boys, depicted a future life as single-without-children. In most of these cases, narrators simply did not mention children. When looking at these alternate



narratives, an interesting point of intersectional variation occurred, showing in-group variations connected to classed environments. In contrast to the ‘cultural elite’ and middle-to-working-class areas of Almstad and Furubakken, the narrators from ‘economic elite’ Eikheim stood out: the majority of girls neither mentioned children nor drew on imagined parental practices in their stories, and wrote less about the inherent tensions connected to reconciling family and work. Eikheim narratives were generally less concerned with relationships, and responsibilities towards ‘the small world’ of the nuclear and extended family, and instead tended to present narratives concerned with ‘the big world’. As one boy noted, ‘all war was gone, (..) everybody was nice to each other’ and the world was ‘more colorful and better for nature’ (Michael, Eikheim). This ‘better world’ focus, common to both boys and girls, was a characteristic feature only found in the Eikheim texts. They were connected to ‘technological optimism’ tied to easier, better living through technological aids and material commodities at home, and at work, in the form of machines and robots that were controlled through ‘your mind’ (Sara, Eikheim), where one did not have to ‘use hands’ (Tiril, Eikheim). Robots also entered the home and took care of children, making it possible to prioritise work over care, as was the case where the female co-parent of one boy whose strong work ethic outside the home-sphere was made possible due to the benefits of technology: the co-parent ‘work(ed) fulltime’ even though she did not have to, because they were ‘very well off’ and had a ‘robot-babysitter’ (Thomas, Eikheim).

### **Narrating work-life within a work-focused society**

Work-life was a dominant theme in most narratives, and students commonly linked it to activities ascribing value to the social identities of their imagined adult selves. They also described earning high incomes, possessing a strong work ethic and having partners with high-status professions (doctors, lawyers, news journalists) to demonstrate this symbolic and material value. In line with the norms inherent in the Norwegian work approach, many students connected hard work to being dutiful ‘good’ and ‘proper’ citizens, as well as to earning personal rewards such as money, success, recognition and flexibility in life.

### **Social solidarity and globalised lives**

The work-life narratives of both boys and girls from all three schools linked work activities to the duty to take care of both one's own family and to society ‘by paying a lot of tax’ (Johannes, Almstad), or by making useful professional contributions. One student developed ‘products that could make everyday life easier for people with disabilities’ (Pernille, Furubakken). Another was ‘doing research on new robots’ and building ‘underwater cities’ to better the conditions of mankind (Hauk, Eikheim). Students were also solving homicides so ‘murderers (couldn't) get away with it’ (Mia, Almstad), ‘talking to people’ with psychological issues (Carmen, Almstad) and ‘helping people with their dreams’ through promotion work (Patrick, Furubakken).

However, there were intersectional variations in the work-life narratives. Several girls from the ‘cultural elite’ area of Almstad stood out as being the only ones imagining themselves in ‘personal caring’ professions (teachers, psychologist). Girls from Almstad were also the main writers of family-focused narratives, implying that the norm of personal care in both family- and work-life was a particular intersectional in-group variation in this area. Furthermore, the narratives from ‘economic elite’ Eikheim also stood out as imagining future lives as self-made, creative and inventive professionals,





with descriptions of a career as an internationally celebrated designer, an award-winning movie director, a popstar, an architect of the rich and famous and an engineer-inventor.

The majority tied work-life to a national context and national solidarity, many still living in the same neighbourhood, as citizens of Norway. But a more globalised way of life was also present in all three schools. This focus was most predominant in Eikheim. There, just under half the narratives, evenly distributed among boy and girl narrators, were tied to travelling for work, or living and working in big cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Munich, suggesting a tendency towards a gender-neutral, globalised future orientation in this area, with work-norms connected to international contributions and opportunities.

## Individualised work achievement

Girls gave work-life either less or equal amounts of space and significance as home- and family-life in their narratives, closely linking their professional achievements to these spheres. Several boys, on the other hand, focused almost entirely on work, giving it significant amounts of space, with detailed descriptions of their achievements in the professional sphere. However, these descriptions were framed in differing ways. The boys from Eikheim presented their success as individual achievements that were tied to contributions and agency towards the bigger world. One had made it as a singer in L.A., with billions of followers, viewers and streams on social media platforms (Michael, Eikheim). Another had ‘everyone very impressed’ during his big day, the official opening of the ‘underwater-city (he) built’ (Hauk, Eikheim). Boys from Almstad and Furubakken framed their achievements more in connection to social identities as key team players, where successful work was tied to success for the work-team. One, a dedicated soccer player, scored two goals ensuring that his team: ‘we’, ‘won the game 3-1!’ (Anders, Almstad). Another had ‘a lovely feeling and slept well’, after having worked against the clock as head of his co-workers to make a deadline remodelling a house, resulting in a great sale and a great bonus (Robin, Furubakken).

## Alternate narratives to working life

In most of the stories, a strict work focus was characterised as a natural circumstance. Even the ‘filthy rich’, got ‘up at seven’ and planned to ‘work later that day’ (Christian, Almstad). There were no narratives where pursuing a post-graduate education was a part of the imagined everyday life, implying that professional competence was taken for granted. There were no narratives describing working-class or traditional manual labour professions. Furthermore, there was only one stay-at-home mom, who referred to domestic full-time work. This student, however, emphasised the ‘foreignness’ of her story, having ‘left’ the Norwegian context and moved to Brazil, thus having an implicit explanation for her exceptional story (Flora, Almstad). Only two students mentioned involuntary unemployment. One portrayed this as a temporary professional failure, having ‘used over a year to find a job’ in an unsuccessful cross-country search, but ultimately coming out on top as leader of the Norwegian Ski Association and ‘living a dream’ (Ingrid, Eikheim). The other tied this less to professional failure and instead to a global dystopia due to climate crisis, overpopulation and poor political leadership, where there were ‘no jobs to be had’ and ‘good grades didn't help’ (Jens, Almstad). From being a hobo in London, he wound up handsomely rewarded for revealing the existence of the lab of a mad scientist who was endangering the world. Another boy who did not work ‘got up at twelve’, and then wrote ‘you're probably thinking, why aren't you at work!’, before dedicating the remainder of the narrative



to how he became a non-working millionaire by saving the Pope as a child (Karl, Almstad). A third drew on winning 20 million Euro through a lotto-and-gambling thriller (Markus, Furubakken). These boys' narratives of worklessness were connected to a special set of activities, and a heroic social identity (Haldar, 2013). They each required extreme risk-taking and good luck to make financial freedom possible. Moreover, these extraordinary narratives provided detailed rationales as to why they did not follow the norm, indicating that a strong work-norm was implicit and that such an explanation was needed when deviating from it.

Several boys from the 'cultural elite' and middle-to-working-class areas of Almstad and Furubakken also highlighted leisure activities, personal interests, fun and relaxation as important values, challenging the predominant work-norm narratives. One spent the last 'three hours' of the workday 'playing games on the computer' before going off to 'skydive' (Per, Almstad). Another 'only' worked 'three times a week' using days off to go to cafes, (Lars, Almstad), while a third described his office job as 'very relaxing' and 'not stressful', focusing instead on 'this perfect day' filled with sunshine where he could enjoy spending time off on his boat (Will, Furubakken).

## CLOSING DISCUSSION

Prospective 'little stories' of imagined futures can provide insights into how children appropriate and make meaning of accessible 'big stories', producing personal accounts that vary across intersectional identities. The students in our study demonstrate an embodied cultural knowledge (Bourdieu, 1984) of actual adult life in their contemporary society, and about their own possibilities as children embarking on adulthood. Their narratives reflect agentic action. They reflect, but also portray tensions with, many of the dominant, normative big stories in Norwegian society, drawing differently from classed and gendered tool-kits, ideals and norms, and challenging the notion of Norway as an egalitarian society where everything is possible for anyone regardless of gender and class. Instead, their little stories may be collectively read as narratives that tap into powerful subject positions and available tracks for action (Davies & Harré, 1990), displaying unequal opportunities for boys and girls from different classed neighbourhoods.

### **Intersectional tensions: Norwegian students narrate their futures**

While the substance of our results cannot be generalised, they make way for important understandings as to how varying ways of knowing are shaped within the contours of Norwegian society. The empirical material may be read as highly conformist, based on a majority bias, with little resistance towards the big stories that dominate. The students all engage with the predominating discourses, regardless of ethnicity, gender and class. Still, our results show subtle variation in how they narrate their imagined futures. As highlighted by Brannen and Nilsen (2002, p. 532): 'how young people view their futures needs to be seen through the lens of the dual epistemology of agency and structure, or, as Roberts et al. (1994) have termed it '*structured individualization*' (emphasis added)'. The students navigate the meaning of their futures in relation to several intersectional dynamics (Orupabo, 2014; Winker & Degele, 2011), reflecting how their experiences and knowledge of the social world works in gendered, classed and normative ways.

In our material, as reported in similar studies from Norway and other relatively affluent countries (Carabelli & Lyon, 2016; Heggli et al., 2013), the narratives indicate idealised, happy and 'normal' everyday futures. This might reflect an idealised Norwegian cultural context, characterised by social and cultural capital from long-term, strong ties, as well as by solidarity towards the family, a child-centred focus, and a Protestant work ethic with active/full employment (Gullestad, 1997). The



narratives might also reflect the pressure to fulfill norms and predominant narratives that are not always compatible in everyday life.

This disconnect was portrayed differently across gender and class in our material, indicating that boys and girls growing up in different classed environments face gendered and classed conditions, accordingly representing varying constraints and affordances. In terms of the big stories of gender equality, our findings reflect a contradiction between the discourses of the Norwegian work-approach and of child-centred parenting (see also Hennem, 2006). There were distinct variations in the empirical material between girls and boys in terms of the main focal point in the narratives produced. A greater share of girl's narratives drew on references to an everyday 'time crunch' connected to a balancing act between full-time work-norms and child-centred parenting norms. Girls spent more time on home-, child- and significant other care than did the boy narrators, and reflected stricter norms concerning parenthood. Girls were at the same time super-parents and super-professionals, describing an awareness and a preparedness for this double responsibility by explicitly prioritising activities and at times writing within a discourse of sacrifice that we did not find in stories narrated by boys. Girls' narratives were in line with Norwegian time use studies from 1980 to 2010 showing that while the gendered differences in labour for parents have lessened, mothers, as compared to fathers, still spend more time on domestic work (Kitterød, 2012). Boys, on the other hand, more often tied imagined adulthood to work outside the home, personal interests and free time. Perhaps these findings reflect the present-day intersection of structural conditions such as gender and age: the gendered norms and pressure associated with being a woman of 30 versus being a man of 30 may differ in Norwegian society. Although men and women both tend to start families at a higher age today than they did 10–20 years ago, many girl narrators' nonetheless envisioned parenting more than one child at the age of 30, whereas many boy narrators did not.

When focusing *across* gender and neighbourhood, an additional picture emerges. Variations emerging across the three neighbourhoods study sites, which with some reservation could be analysed as classed environments, were on their own less striking than variations across gender. Still, an analysis combining focus on gender and class identified in-group variations and intersections. The gendered practices represented in the narratives cannot simply be attributed to in-born gender differences, as they varied across study sites. The narratives from the 'cultural elite' area of Almstad displayed greater gender inequalities between the narrators' imagined lives as adults. The stories from boys in Almstad were particularly rich in descriptions of free time, fun and games, while girls in Almstad most strongly portrayed social identities that emphasised late modern parenting practices, reflecting the intellectual and middle-classed family values, child-centred focus and hegemonic family model for which Norwegian society is known (Hennem, 2015). The narratives from the middle-to-working-class area of Furubakken in many ways resembled the narratives from Almstad, but they did not present as striking a contrast according to gender. Notably, the narratives of girls and boys from 'economic elite' Eikheim did not fit this pattern and portrayed the most gender-neutral narrative patterns when read collectively. There were fewer marked gender variations, and less focus by girls on time-crunch connected to relationships, caretaking and work. More of boys' narratives included parenting in contrast to boys' narratives emerging from the other two neighbourhood schools, while only a very small portion of girls' narratives did. Narrators from Eikheim portrayed scenes of self-actualisation via progress in globalised life spheres. For both girls and boys, the primary focus was on individual mastery and success, through narratives of self-realisation connected to one's career and a modern, technologically imbued life. The narratives from Eikheim overwhelmingly took up a big story of self-making and individuality, in line with what Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (1997) has called a change in Norwegian society over the past decades from a collectivistic emphasis on 'being of use' towards an individualistic emphasis on 'being oneself'. The narratives from Eikheim represented a classed notion



of delayed parenthood for girls, the imagined presence of helpful technology in everyday life that was used to ensure equality in work-life and to 'fix' gender imbalances and tensions more generally.

Almstad and Furubakken narratives seemed to reflect gendered tensions that mark the fault lines emerging between the big stories of the Norwegian welfare state: between the expectation of full-time work, economic equality and the ability to engage in parenting with a child-centred focus. At the same time, the narratives emerging from the 'economic elite' area of Eikheim might reflect an erosion of the big stories shaping the social democratic and egalitarian Norwegian societal tool-kit. A question for further research is what implication continued tensions and a movement towards change might have on Norwegian everyday life. What happens when and if social democracy and egalitarianism are replaced by emerging stories of individuality and material commodification? Narratives framed around a globalised future also suggest movement by those young narrators with more resources and fewer restraints towards 'something new'—individual self-made life and technology. We might then ask how the rights and duties tied to the Norwegian big story of solidarity within both family- and work-life change when responsibility becomes individualised and globalised. Might this 'new' story of resourced globalised individualism also enable changes in the significance of gender? The future use of the methodology of children's prospective narratives, seen across gender and class, and we would add ethnicity, can add valuable insights into debates on issues not primarily associated with childhood: contemporary family politics, work politics, gender equality, globalisation and the sustainability of the welfare state.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Our data was gathered before this became a requirement, and participants in the study have not given their consent to sharing of anonymous data.

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